

A for Adam, B for Bible

Early Public Schools Didn't Separate Church and State

EDUCATION

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In early American public schools, there was no separation between church and state. Tenets of Christianity were embedded in almost every lesson and book, including spelling, reading, history, grammar, arithmetic and science.

A was for Adam, B was for the Bible and C was for Christ. In arithmetic, "How many days is it since the birth of Our Savior?" In geography, "Christianity is the prevailing religion of the leading nations of the world." In science, "All parts of the solar system are framed and adjusted to answer exactly the purpose intended by the Creator." In nature, "The more we examine the insect world, the more sensible do we become of the mighty power and goodness of God."

The schoolbooks used by early Americans were supposed to teach literacy and knowledge, but they also had a broader purpose: to create a national character, instilling children with a belief in God and a moral code appropriate to the pious citizens of a new republic. While learning to read, students also had to absorb messages about religion, patriotism and other virtues, such as thrift, diligence and honesty.

"A sense of God permeates all [early school books] as surely as a sense of nationalism," wrote Ruth Miller Elson in "Guardians of Tradition" (1964). "The books devote the greater part of their space to the subject of God's relationship to the universe, to man and to the child himself."

As late as 1880, Noah Webster's popular spelling book included practice sentences such as, "God created heaven and earth in six days" and "The devil is the great adversary of man."

No Credentials

The first textbooks in American schools—primers and spellers—came from England. They usually included lessons in several subjects in a single volume, guiding the poorly trained teachers as much as their students. But American educators wanted a homegrown curriculum, emphasizing what they saw as uniquely American values. "Unlike aristocratic and monarchical Europe, America was free, young and vigorous," wrote Michael V. Belok in "Forming the American Minds," his 1973 book. "And Americans were convinced that the hand of God played an active part in their affairs."

By the end of the 18th century, a thriving textbook industry had taken root in the U.S. No credentials were required to write a schoolbook, and ministers, lawyers, teachers and publishers all tried their hands at it. Almost all the books were printed and distributed locally, so children in different

areas might be studying different texts. But because there were few copyright laws, schoolbook authors often borrowed or plagiarized similar material from earlier volumes.

The books were subject to little editing or expert review, and they reflected the prejudices of their authors. In his 1784 textbook, "Geography Made Easy," Jedidiah Morse (whose son Samuel would later invent the telegraph) described the characteristics of people living in different U.S. states: Virginians were "indolent, easy and good-natured," he wrote; Westerners "produce a strange sort of lawless profligacy."

Morse especially liked the people of Connecticut. In the 1812 edition of "American Universal Geography," he wrote, "Only two duels were ever fought in the state; the first between two West Indians, the second between two citizens of New York who crossed the line."

The purpose of education, which for many children stopped after elementary school, was to prepare them for life as devout farmers in a frontier democracy. Only useful knowledge was important, and reading material was supposed to be informative or morally edifying.

Arithmetic books often included a section on surveying, with problems involving how to measure tobacco or wheat. National heroes loomed large: Noah Webster's 1787 "Lessons in Reading and Speaking" started, "Begin with the infant in his cradle: Let the first word lisped be 'Washington.'"

'Abstain From Evil'

Schools trained the heart as much as the head: An 1882 reader admonished, "Little children, you must seek rather to be good than wise."

In her 1846 American-history textbook, Emma Willard wrote that her goal, more than training memory or intellect, was "to sow the seeds of virtue, by showing the good in such amiable lights that the youthful heart shall kindle into desires of imitation."

As the country grew and diversified during the 19th century, and waves of immigrants brought their own faiths and opinions to the U.S., overtly religious references were dropped from most school texts. Lessons about virtue and goodness, however, continued. From late 19th-century spellers: "Abstain from evil." "Obey the law." "Be on your guard against evil associates."

Although early schoolbooks portrayed the world as a moral place, where virtue is rewarded and vice punished, they also didn't shrink from the cruel realities of life on the frontier ("Xerxes did die/And so must you and I," said one speller).

"Schoolbooks made the 19th-century child thoroughly aware that life is hard and full of natural and manmade pitfalls," wrote Ms. Elson. "It is his duty to strive for success, but he will struggle hard on the way."

Name _____

Date _____

A for Adam, B for Bible



Read the article “A for Adam, B for Bible” and answer these questions:

- 1 In the 18th century, who wrote textbooks? _____

- 2 What was the purpose of education in the 18th century? _____

- 3 Why were religious references eventually dropped from textbooks? _____

OBJECTIVE

Observe the evolution of textbooks

OVERVIEW

In early American schools, textbooks featured standard topics such as spelling, reading, history, math and science. They also featured strong ties to religion in hopes of building national character in students, not just strong minds.

DISCUSSION/INTERNET/WRITING IDEAS

- The article says books in the 18th century “were subject to little editing or expert review.” Is that the case today? Examine all of your textbooks to find their editors and reviewers. Who are they? Where do they work? Discuss as a class.
- Textbooks in the 18th century had a point of view and those running the public school system did not worry about separating church and state when adopting textbooks. How are textbooks different today? Do you think your textbooks are prejudiced? If yes, explain? Do today’s textbooks include religion? Why or why not? Discuss as a class.
- Use the Internet to research the evolution of textbooks from the time frame discussed in the article—the 18th and 19th centuries—to today. When did textbooks change from primers and spellers to comprehensive volumes of information? Discuss as a class.
- Besides content changes, today’s textbooks are expensive—with many texts costing more than \$100 apiece. It’s a price students have to pay out of their own pockets in college. Why do you think textbooks are so expensive? In groups of three or four, brainstorm ways to make them more affordable and the discuss with the rest of the class.
- Some schools are integrating online textbooks or textbooks on CD-ROMs instead of traditional textbooks in the classroom. Do you think it would be a viable option for your school? Why or why not? Discuss as a class.
- **Debate:** Your general subject textbooks—social studies, history and science—should teach students about religion, patriotism and moral values. Visit wsjclassroom.com/related for a worksheet on effective debating.
- **Additional reading from The Wall Street Journal:** “New Battleground In Textbook Wars: Religion in History” looks at how religious groups are working to change textbooks in California. A link to the article is available at wsjclassroom.com/related.

For more discussion ideas, read “Windows of Opportunity,” about online universities, published in the September 2006 Classroom Edition. A link to the article is at wsjclassroom.com/related.